

Japan to use deep-sea probes to search for minerals

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This photo released in 2007 by the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology's (JAMSTEC) Integrated Ocean drilling Program, shows a deep-sea drilling vessel off the coast of Japan's Wakayama prefecture. Japan plans to deploy unmanned probes to scour the sea-floor around the resource-poor island nation for mineral deposits.

Japan plans to deploy unmanned probes to scour the sea-floor around the resource-poor island nation for mineral deposits, a government-backed scientific organisation said Thursday.

Two underwater robots tethered to a ship would explore the [seabed](#) for rare metals, said an official of the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC), which is set to start the project in fiscal year 2010.

Researchers hope to discover minerals such as manganese, cobalt, lead and zinc used in Japanese products from cars to the batteries in IT gadgets.

JAMSTEC, a government-linked agency that specialises in environmental research and marine technology, plans to invest four billion yen (42.55 million dollars) in the probes, the official said.

The move comes as Japan, the world's second-biggest economy, tries to break away from its dependence on foreign imports of raw materials and energy.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry is trying to secure stable supplies of rare metals amid growing demand from emerging economies that has sparked worries over a supply crunch.

"It is extremely important to ensure stable supplies of rare metals from the standpoint of maintaining and strengthening the competitiveness of Japan's manufacturing industry," the ministry said in a strategy published last week.

It is important for Japan to "strengthen the technology it holds for securing natural resources," it added.

Experts say deep-sea mining, especially near mineral-belching hydrothermal vents on the [sea-floor](#), will become feasible despite huge technical challenges and expenses, as certain minerals become more scarce worldwide.

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